

# Missed Opportunities: Education Among Youth Experiencing Homelessness in America

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The ninth in a series of Research-to-Impact briefs by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago on understanding and addressing youth homelessness.

For the 4.2 million adolescents and young adults who experience some form of homelessness, opportunities to develop and realize their educational aspirations are often disrupted. *Missed Opportunities: Education Among Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness in America* highlights research on the intersection between youth homelessness and educational disruption. We learned that young people experiencing family instability and trauma are at increased risk for unstable living situations and interrupted educational experiences. Youth who leave school before graduation were considerably more likely to experience homelessness. Likewise, youth and young adults who experience homelessness were less likely to enroll in college. If we strengthen our educational supports and youth homelessness systems, we can do more than stop missing opportunities; we can ensure that our youth thrive and meet their full potential.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Voices of Youth: Ray's Story

**Ray<sup>1</sup> is an 18-year-old woman living in Philadelphia. Until the age of 12, she was raised by her single father, who was physically abusive. For a while, she did not tell anyone at school about the abuse because “he took care of me my whole life. . . I was confused. . . I don't want anything bad to happen to him.” Eventually, her school found out about the abuse and investigated, but ultimately Ray remained in her father's home. When asked where her story of housing instability began, Ray recounted a night when her father threatened her, and she “was just so scared” that she fled. After that time, she cycled between the homes of her grandmother, father, and friends, eventually settling at her mother's home.**

Despite her housing instability, and before she lived with her mother, Ray excelled in school. The move to her mother's home prompted a transfer from one middle school to another, and her new school was not a good fit. Her peers made fun of her and physically bullied her for being a “nerd.” At the age of 13, while living with her mother, Ray was arrested and placed in a juvenile facility for 2 years in Pennsylvania. During this time, she attended an off-campus school that connected her with special services for gifted students, and she performed well. Upon returning to her mom's house after her release, Ray attended another new school but was bullied so much that she told the principal, “I can't do it. I'm not learning anything. It's pointless for me to be here.” She completed her high school degree at age 17 through online courses.

Soon after, Ray moved to a city in the southeast to live with and work for a family friend. This move coincided with her acceptance to a university. Ray was eligible to receive financial assistance due to her status as a former foster youth. However, logistical challenges prevented her from accessing it. As a result, she never officially enrolled. She said that “without that grant, I definitely didn't have enough money for it at all.”

Ray ended up couch surfing and staying in parks while looking for work. At the time of the interview, she and her girlfriend were staying at her mother's home. To get by, both were selling crafts and accessing youth-serving agencies in Philadelphia for transportation, food, and housing assistance. Recently, Ray's mother told them that they needed to leave her home.

Like many other stories captured by Voices of Youth Count's in-depth interviews, Ray's account sheds light on the undeniable connections between homelessness and education. The stories also show how related systems and institutions can work together to make a difference in young people's lives. In Ray's case, the right supports were not available for her at the right time; for her, education has mostly been a series of missed opportunities.

## Voices of Youth Count: Education among Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness in America

This Research-to-Impact brief is the ninth in a series. It draws on multiple research components from Voices of Youth Count (VoYC). Adolescence and young adulthood represent a critical developmental window. Every day that young people like Ray experience the stress of housing and educational instability represents a missed opportunity to support healthy development and promote successful transitions to adulthood. VoYC elevates the voices of young people like Ray across our nation who lack the resources to achieve independence and make their unique contributions to society. Throughout this brief, we highlight key findings and new evidence on the intersection between education and homelessness\* among youth\* and young adults.

Our research highlights the complicated interplay between housing instability and homelessness and educational attainment. Youth who left school before graduation were considerably more likely to experience homelessness. Likewise, youth and young adults who experienced homelessness were less likely to enroll in college.

This brief highlights opportunities for the education and homelessness systems to work together to ensure that youth are supported in their living situations, their educational experiences, and their career pursuits.

## Key Findings - Overview

Homelessness and housing instability interfere with young people's abilities and opportunities to stay in school and achieve their educational aspirations. The risk factors for homelessness also overlap with risk factors for school dropout. Early family instability and socioeconomic constraints pose challenges to both housing stability and educational attainment, including:

- youth who do not have a high school diploma or a GED face a greater risk of experiencing homelessness;
- young people who experience homelessness are less likely to attend a 4-year college, and even when they do, many still struggle with homelessness;
- opportunities for young people to advance their education and economic standing may depend on local community resources; and
- young people often do not learn about educational resources from homelessness service providers.

These realities highlight the need for homeless systems and education systems to work together

to simultaneously prevent youth homelessness and promote educational attainment.

## Moving Toward Solutions

Exploring educational interests and advancing toward a career are crucial developmental tasks of adolescence and early adulthood; homelessness prevents too many young people from achieving these milestones. In addition, by virtue of the fact that education relates to job prospects, exiting homelessness is difficult when a young person has limited educational attainment. In spite of these challenges, there are critical opportunities for homelessness and education systems to work together to improve youth outcomes.








Preventing and ending youth homelessness in America requires developing opportunities for all youth to explore and realize their educational aspirations. Otherwise, as a nation, we are missing opportunities to ensure that all young people have the resources and skills they need to reach their full potential and help our communities thrive.

Voices of Youth Count identifies implications and makes recommendations for policymakers, leaders of public systems, and practitioners. We see these recommendations not as an end point, but as the beginning of a dialogue about tangible changes to the nation's laws, regulations, systems, and programs. Voices of Youth Count speaks to the evidence while seeking solutions.



Preventing and ending youth homelessness in America requires developing opportunities for all youth to explore and realize their educational aspirations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

-  Help schools identify youth who are at risk of experiencing homelessness earlier—before they reach a crisis.
-  Strengthen coordination among school support staff, local service providers, and others to provide appropriate and timely supports to students and families.
-  Build partnerships to foster better record sharing so that students encounter minimal disruption to their educational pursuits when they change school districts.
-  Collect information on the housing situations of college applicants, those admitted, and continuing students, so that these institutions can make resources available to enrolled students.
-  Create a single point of contact for students experiencing homelessness.
-  Issue federal joint guidance from the U.S. Departments of Education (ED), Health & Human Services (HHS), and Housing & Urban Development (HUD) on collaborations among local Continuums of Care (CoCs)\*, runaway and homeless youth service providers, and schools to promote coordination of resources and services.
-  Help advance young people’s educational aspirations by supplying youth with information about educational opportunities.





## VOICES OF YOUTH COUNT

Voices of Youth Count is a national research and policy initiative designed to fill critical gaps in the nation's knowledge about homelessness among unaccompanied youth and young adults, ages 13 to 25. The main research components included the following:

- **National survey.** A nationally representative phone-based survey conducted in partnership with the Gallup Organization; interviews with 26,161 people about their self-reported experiences of youth homelessness or the experiences of youth in their households. Detailed follow-up interviews were also conducted with a subsample of 150 people who reported any youth homelessness or couch surfing (staying with others and lacking a safe and stable living arrangement).
- **Youth counts & brief youth survey.** Point-in-time counts of youth experiencing homelessness in 22 counties across the country with brief surveys of 4,139 youths' self-reported experiences and characteristics.
- **Continuums of care & provider survey.** Surveys with 25 Continuums of Care (CoCs) leads and 523 diverse service providers on services and programs delivered in the 22 Youth Count communities.
- **In-depth interviews.** Detailed qualitative and quantitative interviews with 215 young people experiencing homelessness in five communities.
- **Administrative data analysis.** Analysis of various forms of administrative data from multiple communities, including data from the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) that all HUD-funded homelessness services agencies and organizations are required to use; OrgCode, Inc. intake assessment and homelessness systems data; U.S. Department of Education data on student homelessness; and the Foster Care Data Archive—a longitudinal data warehouse containing decades of state data on children in over two dozen states who spent time in foster care—on runaway occurrences.
- **Systematic evidence review.** A comprehensive synthesis of evidence on programs and practices from evaluations of interventions to prevent or address youth homelessness.
- **Policy & fiscal review analysis.** Review of statutory and regulatory entry points for policy action on youth homelessness and focus group discussions with 25 cross-system stakeholders in five communities.

# Five Major Findings

**Finding 1.** Family issues in youth's lives often prompt disruptions that contribute to experiences of homelessness and educational disconnection

**Finding 2.** Reduced educational attainment increases the likelihood of homelessness, and experiences of homelessness reduce the likelihood of school completion

**Finding 3.** Youth experiencing homelessness are less likely to be enrolled in 4-year colleges and a considerable number of college students struggle with homelessness

**Finding 4.** For young people experiencing homelessness, opportunities to pursue education vary significantly across communities

**Finding 5.** Some youth experiencing homelessness do not receive sufficient information or resources to support their educational pursuits

## Summary of Key Youth Homelessness Policies Related to Education

The **McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act**, which established the Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program, assists state education agencies (SEAs) in ensuring that all homeless children and youth have equal access to the same, appropriate education that is provided to their peers, including public preschool education. Under this program, SEAs make grants to local education agencies (LEAs) that must be used to facilitate the educational enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children and youth. Program funds may be used for activities such as tutoring, supplemental instruction, and referral services, and to provide homeless children and youth with medical, dental, mental, and other health services. School-based McKinney-Vento liaisons for homeless children and youth in each LEA are responsible for coordinating services for these youth with other programs.

The **Runaway and Homeless Youth Act** requires the following from service providers:

- **Basic centers**, which provide shelter and social and health services, must have a plan that includes coordination with McKinney-Vento school liaisons to ensure that runaway and homeless youth receive information about available educational services.
- **Home-based services**, which include various programs that support family strengthening. These programs are geared towards youth at risk of family separation and homelessness. Some of these programs also promote educational attainment.
- **Transitional living services**, which provide stable housing and supportive services for up to 21 months for youth experiencing homelessness, must develop an adequate plan to ensure proper referral of homeless youth to educational (including postsecondary education), vocational, and training opportunities (including services and programs for youth available under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act).

## Finding 1. Family issues in youth's lives often prompt disruptions that contribute to experiences of homelessness and educational disconnection

We learned a great deal from 215 in-depth interviews that we conducted through VoYC. In the brief entitled *Missed Opportunities in Youth Pathways through Homelessness*,<sup>2</sup> we highlight the longstanding and pervasive experiences of family and community instability that often characterize the lives of youth experiencing homelessness. For many, these early experiences of instability involved maltreatment, family conflict, foster care involvement, parental separation or death, family mobility, and homelessness. In fact, 73% of youth ages 13–25 who participated in the in-depth interviews reported experiencing prior homelessness in childhood or early adolescence.

Studies show that early experiences of family trauma and instability can also have long-term consequences for educational attainment, such as heightened school mobility, breaks in educational continuity, and diminished school engagement.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, young people across the five in-depth interview sites said that they experienced frequently disrupted schooling due to moving a lot, which often started in elementary or middle school and lasted through high school. One youth said:

*I moved around so much I never had a stable place here. I was either getting into the class late or leaving the class early. There was always some reason why I never successfully had a complete class—like school year. Libra, Philadelphia, PA*

Some youth described school disengagement caused by family responsibilities, such as when a parent was largely absent or unavailable. For example, we heard:

*A lot of times I would have to prepare my sister for school and make sure she left, and it wasn't in favorable circumstances. My mom was just not able to. That morning, a lot of mornings, you know. And I would be late for school. I'd be like there I was late to school. At one point they were going to charge me [with] truancy for not coming to school on time every day. Leaf, Philadelphia, PA*

For young people in high school or college, issues of housing affordability and cost of living greatly impacted schooling. The housing challenges they described included trying to find stable housing before going back to school, being kicked out of their homes while going to college, and being required to leave their dorms over holiday breaks. Youth also described dropping out of high school or postponing college due to the difficulty of balancing work and school when they needed to work to meet basic needs:

*I dropped out when I was a freshman. . . 'cause I was in between working and going to school. . . . It was horrible 'cause I couldn't be studying at the same time and working, so I needed to stay in one path.* Carlos, Travis County, TX

In spite of these experiences, youth and young adults reported that they value education and structured learning opportunities. Many were motivated to pursue their educational goals. One youth said:

*I don't want anything getting in the way of my career. I do not want to close a door just to open another door. I want to keep this door open cause I know I can't go through two doors at once. I would have to literally cut myself in half if I were to do that, that's gonna just make me more stress.* Gemini, Cook County, IL

Our findings from the in-depth interviews reveal that challenging family dynamics not only increase the likelihood of youth becoming homeless, they also interfere with young people's

opportunities to pursue their educational goals once they experience homelessness. Homelessness, housing instability, and related adversities—such as interpersonal violence, trauma, and mental and physical health concerns—make it harder to complete school. In turn, given that more education typically yields higher earnings, low educational attainment complicates youth's efforts to secure stable housing and avoid recurring homelessness.

### **Finding 2. Reduced educational attainment increases the likelihood of homelessness, and experiences of homelessness reduce the likelihood of school completion**

The VoYC national survey found that not completing high school is the greatest single risk factor associated with experiencing unaccompanied homelessness as a young person. Thirty-five percent of youth without a high school degree or GED reported homelessness within the prior year,<sup>4</sup> compared to 10% of those with at least a high school diploma or GED. This means that those who did not complete high school were 4.5 times more likely to experience homelessness than their peers who completed high school.

Similarly, looking at this issue from the other end, youth and young adults experiencing homelessness are less likely to have completed a high school diploma or GED than their peers.

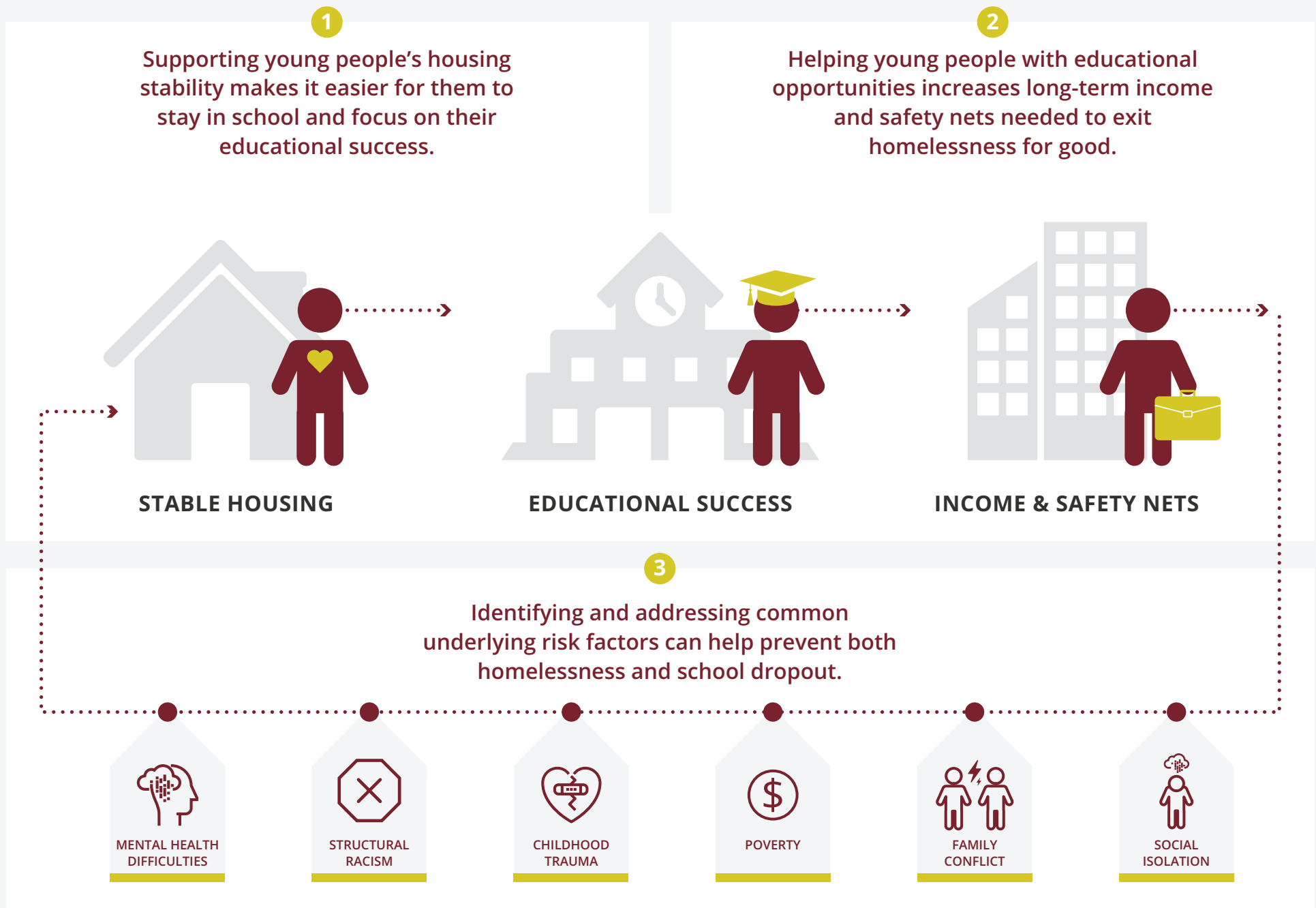
## **Summary of Key Youth Homelessness Policy Related to Education (Continued)**

The **Higher Education Act (HEA)** authorizes financial aid and support programs that target homeless students and other vulnerable populations. Individuals under age 24 can be verified during the school year as either:

- (1) unaccompanied and homeless or
- (2) unaccompanied, self-supporting, and at risk of homelessness.

This verification can come from a McKinney-Vento liaison, the director (or designee) of a program funded under the Runaway and Homeless Youth program, the director (or designee) of an emergency shelter or transitional housing program funded by HUD, or a financial aid administrator. Separately, HEA provides that homeless children and youth are eligible for what is collectively called the federal TRIO programs. The TRIO programs include Talent Search, Upward Bound, Student Support Services, and Educational Opportunity Centers. The TRIO programs are designed to identify potential postsecondary students from disadvantaged backgrounds, prepare these students for higher education, provide certain support services to them while they are in college, and train individuals who provide these services.

**Figure 1.** We need systemic solutions that address education and homelessness together





Nationally, 34% of 18-to 25-year-olds who experienced homelessness and participated in the brief youth survey lacked a high school diploma or GED, compared with 14% of 18- to 25-year-olds in the general population. Further, about half (48%) of youth aged 16--24 who were homeless or housing unstable were disconnected from school or work, compared to 13% in the general population.

The association between lower levels of education and youth homelessness remain even when we account for other characteristics, such as race, sexual orientation, and household income. Indeed, the relationship between educational attainment and homelessness was significant for all racial and ethnic groups (i.e., American Indian and Alaska Native, black, Hispanic, and white), except for Asian youth. For Asian youth, factors such as parenting status and LGBTQ identity were more strongly related to experiences of homelessness than for other subpopulations. We surmise that their encounters with homelessness may be influenced by cultural tensions between the youth's emerging identities and the prevailing social norms held by their families.

Among 18- to 25-year-old youth experiencing homelessness who identify as white, completion rates for at least some college credits were low (28%). They were even lower for those identifying as black (22%), American Indian or Alaska Native (15%), or Hispanic (13%). For the same subpopulations who had not experienced homelessness, completion rates of at least some postsecondary education were more than double for most groups: 51%, 44%, 34%, and 35%, respectively. These statistics reflect the extent to which youth experiencing homelessness—especially youth of color—also face financial disadvantages in an economy that requires higher levels of education for jobs with viable incomes and benefits.

Trends showing disproportionate representation of some racial/ethnic groups experiencing homelessness and lower education level emerge in other school-based studies,<sup>4</sup> such as the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). The YRBS is a national study of health risk behaviors among

public high school students, and a recent analysis found white youth in grades 9–12 are less likely to experience homelessness, relative to their representation in the general population (36% vs. 52%). Yet, black youth (20% vs. 15%), Hispanic youth (32% vs. 22%), and other youth (12% vs. 10%) were overrepresented in the population of homeless youth, relative to their representation in the general population. This analysis also found that 30% of high school students experiencing homelessness identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning (LGBQ), as compared with 14% of youth in the general population identifying as LGBQ. Ultimately, black, Hispanic, and LGBQ populations are at greater risk of not completing high school; it is possible that limited educational attainment is one of the explanations for their increased susceptibility to becoming homeless.

We do not know if one experience causes the other, but we do know that many of the same risk and protective factors underlie both educational attainment and housing stability. Considerable evidence points to the economic and long-term health and well-being benefits of educational achievement.<sup>5</sup> Preventing homelessness may help to prevent school disruption, which in turn may be a step towards educational attainment. Housing stability and educational success are both essential ingredients for young people's social and economic mobility; obtaining one without the other is a considerable challenge.

### **Finding 3. Youth experiencing homelessness are less likely to be enrolled in 4-year colleges and a considerable number of college students struggle with homelessness**

The #RealCollege survey has yielded the most comprehensive and wide-ranging picture of the housing insecurity and material hardship of young adults attending college.<sup>6</sup> Led by Goldrick-Rab and colleagues at the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, this survey involved approximately 86,000 students at 123 colleges across the U.S.<sup>7</sup>

The authors found that 49% of young people enrolled in 2- and 4-year colleges experienced housing insecurity and 16% experienced homelessness. Among survey respondents ages 18 to 25 enrolled in 2-year colleges, which include community and technical colleges, 54% were housing insecure and 18% were homeless during a 1-year period. At 4-year colleges, 42% of students were housing insecure and 13% were homeless within the previous year.

In the VoYC national survey analysis of postsecondary education and homelessness, we relied on a single question about 4-year college enrollment. Among young adults ages 18–25, 4-year college<sup>8</sup> enrollment was four times higher for youth without experiences of homelessness in the prior 12 months (52% compared to 15%). We also asked whether young people experienced explicit homelessness or couch surfing\* within the prior 12 months.<sup>9</sup> We found about 5% of young adults enrolled in 4-year colleges reported some form of homelessness within the prior 12 months.

The VoYC national survey also showed that the percentages of youth ages 18–25 who were enrolled in 4-year colleges and reported explicit homelessness were about 1% for white, non-Hispanic youth, 1% for Hispanic youth, and 2% for black youth. White youth enrolled in college were moderately more likely to report "couch surfing only" than black and Hispanic youth enrolled in college. Survey follow-up interviews found 29% of youth ages 18–25 were enrolled in college or another educational program during *the time* they experienced an incident of homelessness (including either explicit homelessness or unstably housed couch surfing).

The VoYC and #RealCollege surveys reveal alarming levels of homelessness and housing instability among college students. #RealCollege estimated the prevalence of homelessness among 4-year college students at 14%. VoYC estimates are a bit lower, at 5%. This difference might be due to the nature of the populations who participated. The VoYC survey engaged a representative group of young adults from across the country and captured a broad spectrum of communities without specifically tapping college communities. #RealCollege recruited colleges and universities that volunteered to participate and included 33 largely state and urban universities. As such, #RealCollege intentionally sampled only college students and included a more urban, disadvantaged group of young people.

Whereas college students are at lower risk of homelessness than nonstudents, a considerable number of students struggle with homelessness and housing instability, particularly in 2-year colleges. The VoYC survey found lower rates of explicit homelessness among college students and comparable rates of couch surfing in students and nonstudents. Similarly, the #RealCollege survey found the majority (78%) of homelessness among 2-year college students is in the form of couch surfing.

#### **Finding 4. For young people experiencing homelessness, opportunities to pursue education vary significantly across communities**

Across the country, the resources that exist in communities determine children and youth's opportunities to capitalize on their educational aspirations and achieve upward mobility. Chetty and colleagues have found that growing up in certain neighborhoods across the country can increase children's chances of economic success, where as growing in other communities can weaken the chances of success.<sup>10</sup> One of the essential characteristics of the neighborhoods where children are more likely to succeed is high-quality schools. This speaks to the value of having strong educational resources in a community. Two of the other characteristics of high-opportunity neighborhoods are lower levels of income/racial segregation and lower levels of income inequality. Across the board, we know that young people of color who live in racially and ethnically segregated neighborhoods characterized by socioeconomic inequality are more likely to attend low-quality educational institutions.<sup>11</sup> These unequal early educational experiences may influence racial and ethnic disparities in academic outcomes and compound the ability of youth of color to sustainably exit homelessness.

Local community resources that support children and youth are essential, but for young people experiencing homelessness, these resources can be a lifeline. In an earlier VoYC brief, Youth Homelessness in Rural America,<sup>12</sup> we reported that youth homelessness was about equally prevalent in urban and rural\* communities.

**Figure 2.** Data show strong relationships between education and homelessness

**The relationship between educational attainment and homelessness is bidirectional.**

Low educational attainment is a risk factor for homelessness\*....



Young adults with less than a high school diploma or GED were

**4.5x**

more likely to report experiencing homelessness than their peers who completed high school.

...and homelessness is a risk factor for lower educational attainment.



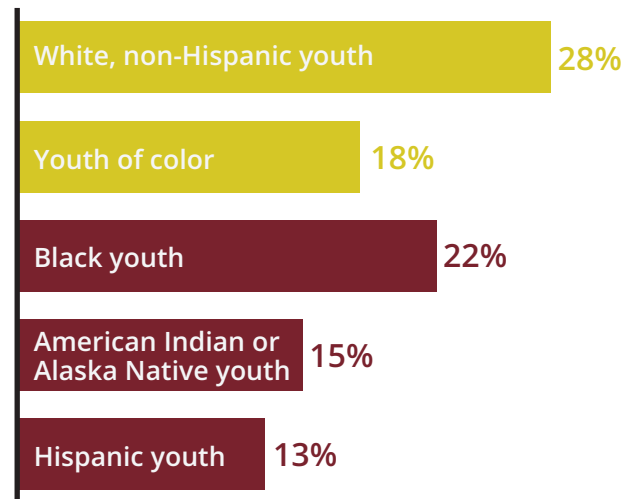
Young adults who experienced homelessness were less than

**1/3**

as likely to be enrolled in four-year college as stably housed peers.

**Racial and ethnic inequities cut across both homelessness and educational outcomes.**

Among young adults, ages 18-25, experiencing homelessness, rates of at least some postsecondary education:



\*Note: For this figure, the youth of color group includes Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Hispanic identifying young adults. The differences between Hispanic and White, non-Hispanic youth and between youth of color and White, non-Hispanic youth are statistically significant. The differences between Black or American Indian and Alaska Native youth and White youth are not statistically significant; this is likely due to smaller sample sizes, which make it hard to reach statistical significance.

\*Note: In this infographic, we use explicitly reported homelessness (youth who said they experienced homelessness). We did not include those who reported couch surfing and not homelessness. This is due to analytical limitations with the couch surfing variable, but we present broader couch surfing statistics elsewhere (see the VoYC national estimates brief.)

(Source: VoYC national survey)

Local community resources that support children and youth are essential, but for young people experiencing homelessness,

**these resources can be a lifeline.**



The brief explains that youth in rural communities experience homelessness in more hidden ways (i.e., more likely couch surfing than staying in shelters). They often have to travel greater distances to access supports, which are scarce and scattered. This may contribute to their homelessness being more “hidden.” Our findings on rural homelessness highlight the need for resources and supports to be designed based on community size and geography. Smaller, rural communities have limited infrastructure and more widely dispersed populations, which can present challenges for youth who seek resources to secure housing and its related safety and stability.

In the VoYC brief youth survey of youth experiencing homelessness, 27% of young adults ages 18 to 25 in large communities were attending school, as compared with 21% in medium-sized, and 17% in small (more rural) communities.

Similarly, the proportion of youth disconnected from education and employment is greater in smaller communities. Fifty-seven percent of youth in small communities were disconnected from school and work, as compared with 51% in medium and 46% in large urban communities. One of the challenges that emerged for youth experiencing homelessness, which is particularly salient for youth in small communities, is the lack of transportation. Sasha, a young person from San Diego who participated in the in-depth interviews, said “would be really helpful as far as [our] commute back to school.” Evidently, young adults living in small communities experience challenges with staying stably housed and continuing their education, which warrants providing greater resources for these young people.

**Finding 5. Some youth experiencing homelessness do not receive sufficient information or resources to support their educational pursuits.**

Research consistently identifies education as a critical prerequisite for skilled jobs that, in turn, promote economic advancement. The economic benefits of college completion are evident in an “education premium” that accrues across the lifetime.<sup>13</sup> Men with 4-year degrees earn more than \$1 million more than men with high school degrees; for women, the difference is about \$800,000. Since income is correlated with education and central to the ability to afford safe and stable housing, youth should be encouraged in their educational pursuits to improve their individual well-being and their chances for social progress and mobility.

A youth's capacity to pursue education while experiencing homelessness may depend in part on the existence and nature of programs, available resources, and strength of collaboration between service providers and schools in their community. Local history and context influence the extent to which communities have the resources to develop new programs, systems, and routines that promote educational attainment. In the VoYC provider survey, two-thirds of runaway and homeless youth (RHY)<sup>14</sup> providers and youth service organizations (YSO) had relationships with local schools. These school-provider partnerships facilitate referrals of students for case management, family interventions, and health services, among other services.<sup>15</sup> Communities are harnessing these partnerships, yet, they do not always have sufficient capacity to provide a diverse and contoured range of supports for youth experiencing homelessness.

Broad differences exist in the availability of education programs and resources for youth who are both experiencing (or at risk for) homelessness and disconnected from school. Of RHY providers, two-thirds reported offering educational services and resources. These providers most commonly provided case management (95%), a customary "core" service that often serves as a platform for other efforts, as well as assistance with basic needs (86%), life skills training (85%), employment (84%), and transportation (81%). About 60% of YSO providers reported offering educational services and resources. More commonly, they offered life skills training (76%) and case management (75%).

Case management and basic resources are, undoubtedly, essential forms of assistance. These fundamental supports can promote connections with affirming providers whose resources can facilitate the discovery and pursuit of educational opportunities. A supportive guidance counselor might assist a young person in accessing funds to support transportation to school. A case manager can encourage a young person to explore college opportunities that they might not have thought possible. This requires tangible resources, such

as time and flexible funds, embedded in a system that is sensitive, supporting, and attuned to housing stability as a fundamental platform for positive developmental and educational attainment.

In the VoYC provider survey, about two-thirds of respondents indicated that they make education referrals for young people. In contrast, young people who participated in VoYC interviews relayed missed opportunities for service providers to share information and resources about education; just 1 in 5 youth indicated that they learned about education resources from providers. This apparent disconnect highlights the need for organizations to provide the right support at the right time. These young people need to be engaged in creative ways. Educational programs can be a powerful, positive influence on the lives of young people as they seek to advance their economic mobility and seek sustainable exits from homelessness.

*That was really the only program that encouraged me to try to get back in school or do something. All the other programs was like. . . whatever you wanna do, so if I say I wanna go to school, they just go off what I say. They not really gonna encourage me to do it, they not gonna try to help me to see what school, I can go to or nothing. . . .* Jenna, Cook County, IL

Other essential sources of information and resources for youth experiencing homelessness can be found in high schools. Among students attending middle or high school who participated in the in-depth interviews, 58% reported receiving free or reduced-price lunches, and 45% reported receiving transportation services. Youth described helpful connections they made with school and program staff; they also highlighted barriers that they experienced in locating supports through schools. Frequent moves between schools make it difficult to engage with key school staff, particularly because young people fear stigma around school staff and peers becoming aware of their homelessness.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, we make recommendations for three main audiences: primary and secondary school administrators, administrators at institutions of higher education, and representatives of homelessness systems. There are critical opportunities to strengthen the structures both within and between these systems to prevent and end youth homelessness. The recommendations cover policy, practice, and future research.

## Recommendations for Primary and Secondary Schools

### ***Help schools identify youth who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness earlier—before they reach a crisis.***

Our findings clearly show that one critically needed prevention measure for addressing youth homelessness and educational disruption is strengthening supports during middle and high school years. Though it is unclear if the lack of a high school education causes youth homelessness, or vice versa, it is clear that these two outcomes are deeply interconnected. Because schools have nearly universal access to children and young adults, they hold the greatest potential to make advances in critical areas of support for these youth. Schools provide the information and resources needed for pursuing an education and could leverage opportunities to identify student needs early to help prevent homelessness and its consequences. Since we know that dropping out of school and homelessness frequently occur together, we can design ways to intervene. Schools can be better equipped to assist young people who need support to negotiate the typical complexities of high school and the additional demands of housing instability and homelessness.

### ***Strengthen coordination among school support staff, local service providers, and others to provide appropriate and timely supports to students and families.***


Support staff in schools and communities may include McKinney-Vento liaisons, runaway and homeless youth basic center program staff, AmeriCorps volunteers, Title I staff, school counselors, and others. These

individuals are critical resources for youth experiencing homelessness and housing instability. Opportunities abound to increase alignment between their efforts to support youth who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

ED could facilitate the progress of such efforts in school systems across the country by assisting schools to learn how to identify which students are in need of coordinated supports. Specifically, ED can issue guidance to clarify federal policy about sharing, use, and consent pertaining to educational records and screening surveys in schools.


It is also necessary to increase coordination between family-focused systems working with homeless youth providers and McKinney-Vento liaisons. One example of this coordination is how the child welfare system includes McKinney-Vento liaisons on the teams that provide preventive services. The new Families First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) also provides an opportunity for both child welfare and homeless youth services providers to build partnerships. As child welfare jurisdictions develop their FFPSA prevention plans, they can invite McKinney-Vento liaisons to the table to determine how best to engage one another when youth experiencing homelessness seek services. Additionally, McKinney-Vento liaisons can help identify youth who may be most in need of child welfare services under FFPSA as well as share insights about the most impactful types of services to consider within a prevention plan.

In 2012, HHS, HUD, and ED issued a Joint Statement on meeting the needs of families experiencing homelessness with young children.<sup>16</sup> These departments are in a strong position to issue a similar Joint Statement that provides guidance and examples for how programs supported by different federal agencies can collaborate and align resources to help young people complete high school. This guidance might include how federal programs can help students access free school meals; applications for needed services such as Medicaid and food stamps; transportation options; resources for school supplies, clothing, and school event fees; college counseling; and assistance with available housing options, such as emergency shelters or other transitional housing programs.

 ***Build partnerships to foster better record sharing so that students encounter minimal disruption to their educational pursuits when they change school districts.***

Building partnerships between homelessness and education systems, both within and between CoCs and school districts, can reduce the academic disruptions youth encounter when they move between schools or school districts due to housing instability. The ability to retain credits is crucial for a student to avoid educational disruption and advance their education. Local school boards and SEAs may have unique interpretations of federal policies related to educational record sharing, such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. By identifying and addressing the barriers to record sharing for youth who are housing unstable, systems will be better equipped to facilitate youth's transitions to a new school.

### **Recommendations for Institutions of Higher Education**

 ***Collect information on the housing situations of college applicants, those admitted, and continuing students, so that these institutions can make resources available to enrolled students.***

Every state can influence higher education institutions located within their borders, particularly their state-funded institutions. As such, there is an opportunity to collect information on housing instability for each applicant, newly admitted student, and ongoing student. This level of consistent information gathering can identify the scope of need within state institutions of higher education. Understanding the scope of need can help to inform state legislatures on which supports and resources should be provided to students. Gathering information on the housing situations of students will also help schools identify which students may need additional supports to complete their degrees successfully.

## **School-based Innovations to Promote Student Well-Being**

In recent years, new service models have emerged that leverage partnerships between schools and community organizations to better meet the holistic needs of students and their families. These models offer examples of how partnerships can support young people's needs and well-being early by addressing their underlying risks for homelessness, school dropout, and other adverse outcomes.

The most widely implemented of these models to date is the Community Schools model. Community Schools recognize the inherent connections among student academic achievement, health and well-being, and community and family ties. The model relies primarily on schools partnering with local community organizations to provide a host of health and social services. These schools also intentionally engage families and communities in each student's growth and achievement to build the student's potential and promote a well-rounded citizen.

Another common model framework is the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model, developed by the Centers for Disease Control. Similar to the Community Schools model, the WSCC aims to elevate the importance of student health by emphasizing the need for ten components that pertain to well-being, such as physical education, nutrition, health services, and community and family engagement, among others. This model intends to surround students with healthy environments and provide resources and opportunities that promote good health as a foundation for academic engagement and general well-being.

A new model for preventing youth homelessness is emerging across multiple communities in the U.S. It draws on the promising findings of The Geelong Project, which was first implemented in Australia. This model connects the school district, the community, a local service provider, and a research and evaluation partner to screen all students in grades 7 through 12 for homelessness and risks for homelessness and school dropout. Once screened, school support staff follow up with individual students and their families. Staff may refer youth and their families to the service provider for case management, housing resources, and family interventions. The goal of this model is to provide services to youth and families before they reach a point of crisis. Chapin Hall is currently working with a small number of communities to adapt and pilot this approach in the U.S.

For example, a report from the Wisconsin Hope Lab highlighted a series of programs at community colleges for students, including meal vouchers, food scholarships, and housing vouchers.<sup>17</sup> Understanding the breadth of students' needs can be the impetus for colleges to extend housing and other basic resource programs to students.

Federal resources currently support this aim. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is the primary mechanism for students to obtain financial aid. Its application form currently asks students to indicate their risk of homelessness or if they were determined to be homeless by their high school or district homeless liaison, an emergency shelter or transitional housing program funded by HUD, or a runaway or homeless youth basic center or transitional living program.<sup>18</sup> The FAFSA is an important tool to help identify which college students may need additional supports. Capturing information on housing instability for each student completing the form—including from students who may not have had a determination by the listed entities, but believe they are experiencing housing instability as they prepare to enter college—is a critical early identification opportunity.

### ***Create a single point of contact for students experiencing homelessness.***

Institutions of higher education could create and promote single points of contact for students experiencing homelessness, similar to McKinney-Vento liaisons in elementary, middle, and high schools. These individuals could be responsible for coordinating services for students to help them complete their higher education. In California, a recent Assembly bill established the Success for Homeless Youth in Higher Education Act. This law requires public colleges in the state to extend priority registration and other benefits afforded to youth exiting foster care to youth experiencing homelessness. Additionally, it establishes the role of a liaison to support both youth exiting foster care and youth experiencing homelessness to obtain needed services.

## **Recommendations for Homelessness Systems**

### ***Issue federal joint guidance from ED, HHS, and HUD on collaborations among local Continuums of Care (CoC), runaway and homeless youth service providers, and schools to promote coordination of resources and services.***

HUD took a critical step in its CoC application<sup>19</sup> by issuing guidance on how CoCs and ED could meet the statutory requirement that they demonstrate collaboration. In next year's application, HUD should require that CoCs also include how they plan to evaluate the impacts of their coordination with the education system in order to ensure this connection is strengthened over time. Similarly, HHS could require that their grantees evaluate the impact of coordination with the education system.

The federal government can play a key role in supporting states to identify young people struggling with housing instability. Federal resources, including technical assistance, can be deployed to support the coordination between colleges and runaway and homeless youth service providers to rapidly identify young people who are experiencing homelessness or housing instability and who are in need of additional supports.

### ***Help advance young people's educational aspirations by supplying youth with information about educational opportunities.***

While youth experiencing homelessness across the country are at risk for educational disruption and struggle to locate adequate services, the service gaps can be particularly stark in rural communities. Federal policy and funding should ensure that rural communities have sufficient access to resources to develop tailored solutions to identify and support young people to achieve both housing stability and their educational goals.

Getting information to young people about services is also crucial. Increasingly, young people have or can easily find access to the Internet and cell phones, and programs can reach youth through social media and other digital methods.

Schools and homeless youth providers have an opportunity to revise their approaches to reach this generation of youth. State and local governments can support these innovative efforts.

## CONCLUSION

*Missed Opportunities: Education among Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness in America* offers insights about the complex, interdependent relationship between homelessness and educational attainment. VoYC research highlights the need for policies and public systems to address these outcomes together and also reveals the role of early family instability as a significant precursor to young people's trajectories into both homelessness and disrupted educational attainment.

In reflecting on Ray's story, we can imagine a different set of outcomes that might have occurred in a community with the resources and expertise to anticipate and avert the educational consequences of her housing instability. During high school, when Ray's family relationships were a cause of significant distress, a trusting relationship with a counselor might have shored her up or helped ease her transition to a new school. A supportive guidance counselor or college financial aid officer might have helped ensure access to tuition assistance, campus housing, course enrollment, and regular supports until she ultimately completed her degree. Tangible supports might lead to real accomplishments, greater economic security and autonomy, and the knowledge that she had a safe and predictable place to sleep at the end of every day. The availability of responsive supports might bring different outcomes and offer her a level of dignity that all young people deserve.

Schools and colleges are vital contexts for socialization and intellectual development during the transition to adulthood. Schools provide concrete supports for young people, such as food, physical and mental health resources, and a stable routine, in addition to their overarching educational objectives. We know that homelessness can interfere with these developmental needs, and the experience of homelessness is further affected by intersectionalities (e.g., racial, ethnic, and gender inequities) that cut across both homelessness and educational outcomes. Indeed,

youth of color are more likely to face certain educational outcomes and experiences, such as school disciplinary actions and dropout, which place them at greater risk for homelessness. And youth of color who experience homelessness are likely to lag on educational attainment, making it harder for them to escape homelessness.

Despite the challenges that housing instability poses, youth can continue their education, succeed in the workforce, and achieve economic stability. These young people have aspirations and possess untapped potential. It behooves local service providers to communicate effectively about educational opportunities and connect young people to them.

Secondary schools and higher education institutions can support these activities by developing coordinated identification and referral pathways that help youth obtain stable housing and basic resources during a crucial developmental transition. Involving young people in the design and approach of services can lead to the development of more affirming, feasible, and effective services.

Ray's story is just one of far too many that underscore the alarming extent and impact of youth homelessness during adolescence and emerging adulthood. These are sensitive developmental periods when young people need stability, support, and affirmation to explore facets of their identities, pursue their interests and hobbies, and chart a course for future academic and career endeavors.<sup>20, 21</sup> Experiencing homelessness during these times disrupts the continuity of a young person's trajectory, reduces the likelihood of high school graduation and college enrollment, and places them in a highly uncertain position at an important time in their development.

Given what is at stake, it is incumbent upon local, state, and federal governments to better support the ability of school, college, and youth homelessness services and systems to work together. Education is both an essential prevention pathway that helps protect youth from experiencing homelessness and a vital intervention pathway that can promote sustainable exits from homelessness. Young people need both stable homes and opportunities to pursue their educational pursuits because when young people thrive, their communities thrive, too.



## GLOSSARY

**Couch surfing:** Moving from one temporary place to another.

**Continuum of Care (CoC):** A regional or local organization that coordinates funding for housing and services for families and individuals experiencing homelessness.<sup>22</sup>

**Homelessness:** We use the term homeless to describe the experience of sleeping in places in which people are not meant to live, staying in shelters, or temporarily staying with others (“couch surfing”) and not having a safe and stable alternative. Voices of Youth Count focuses on homelessness among youth who are not accompanied by a parent or guardian.

**Rural:** Chapin Hall’s Youth Counts compare six counties with relatively small population sizes to seven with medium-sized populations and nine with large population sizes. Our In-Depth Interviews with young people, which were conducted in five counties of all sizes, included one of the six small counties, Walla Walla County, WA. Although these six small counties had relatively low population sizes, three of them, including Walla Walla County, do not meet the U.S. Census Bureau’s formal definition of a rural county. This definition is based on a range of characteristics, such as population size, population density, household density, resident interpretations, and the presence of (or distance from) metropolitan areas.

**Youth:** We define youth as individuals between 13 and 25 years old to align with language in the 2008 reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. However, we distinguish between minors (ages 13–17) and young adults (ages 18–25).

## ENDNOTES

1. Throughout this brief, we use pseudonyms that young people chose for themselves to protect their identities.
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8. The national survey only asked about four-year college enrollment, so we do not have information on those enrolled in two-year colleges, which are likely to have more disadvantaged and housing insecure student populations. The precise question asked in the national survey (intended primarily for another research project) was the following: “Are you currently enrolled, either full-time or part-time, in college or university in a program that will lead to a four-year bachelor’s degree, or not?” These rates are likely lower than those estimated by the recent #RealCollege survey because of the focus on four-year colleges while the #RealCollege survey included both two- and four-year institutions. Additionally, even among the four-year institutions sampled by the #RealCollege survey, these were largely urban and public institutions that are likely to have higher shares of disadvantaged students overall.
9. The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) and the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (reauthorized, 2019) recognize couch surfing and “doubling up” as homelessness under certain circumstances.
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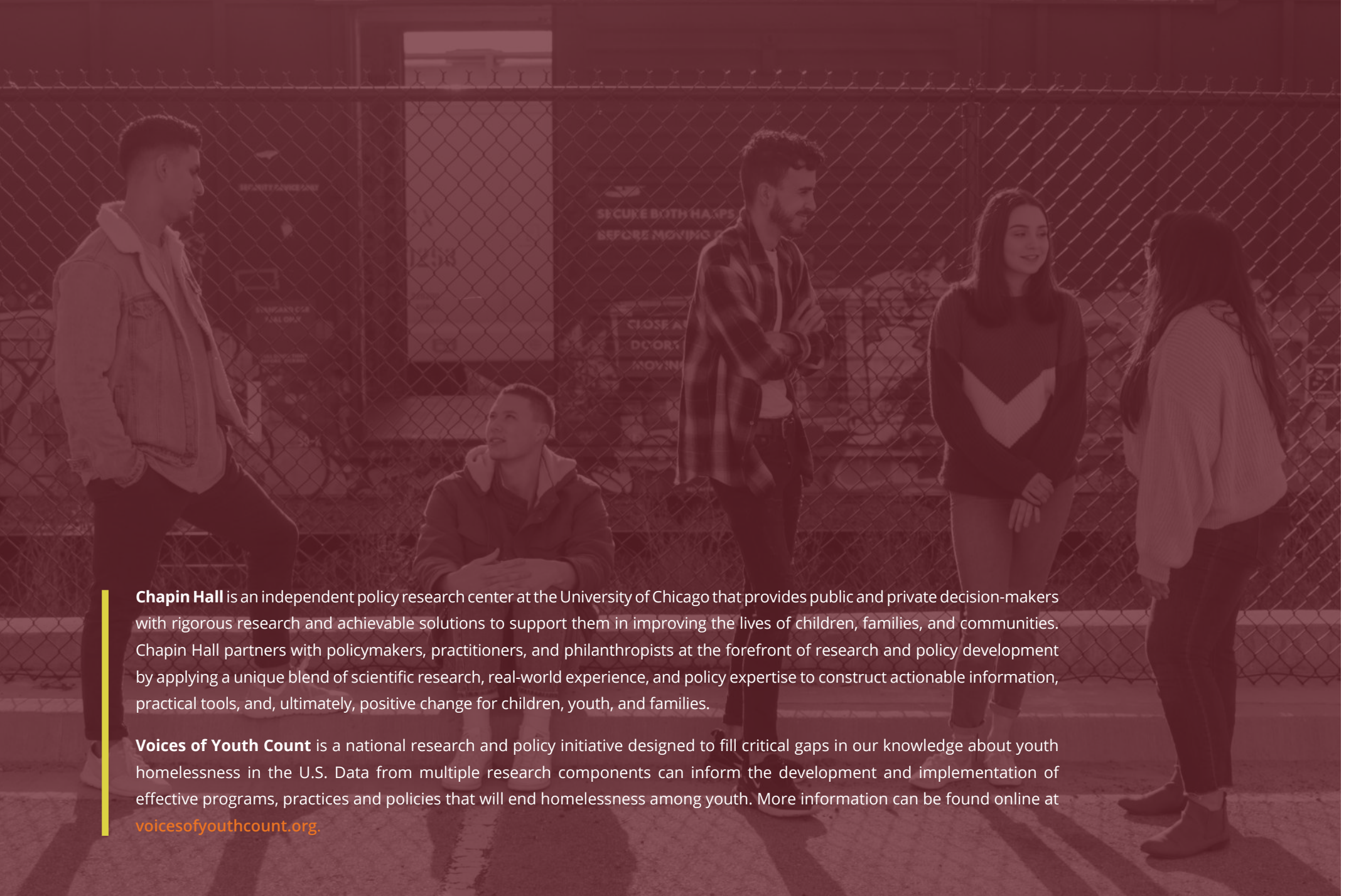
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**Voices of Youth Count** is a national research and policy initiative designed to fill critical gaps in our knowledge about youth homelessness in the U.S. Data from multiple research components can inform the development and implementation of effective programs, practices and policies that will end homelessness among youth. More information can be found online at [voicesofyouthcount.org](https://voicesofyouthcount.org).